

# HOW THEY SANK THE PIRATE SHIP

(From "HARD CASH")

BY CHARLES READE

At six twenty-five, the grand orb set calm and red, and the sea was gorgeous with miles and miles of great ruby dimples; it was the first glowing smile of Southern latitude. The night stole on so soft, so clear, so balmy, all were loth to close their eyes on it; the passengers lingered long on deck, watching the Great Bear dip, and the Southern Cross rise, and overhead a whole heaven of glorious stars most of us have never seen, and never shall see in this world. So the night passed.

Now carmine streaks tinged the eastern sky at the water's edge; and that water blushed; now the streaks turned orange, and the waves below them sparkled. Thence splashes of living gold flew and settled on the ship's white sails, the deck and the faces; and with no more prologue, being so near the line, up came majestically a huge, fiery, golden sun, and set the sea flaming liquid topaz.

Instantly the lookout at the foretop-gallant-masthead hailed the deck below.

"Strange sail! Right ahead!"

The strange sail was reported to Captain Dodd, then dressing in the cabin. He came soon after on deck and hailed the lookout: "Which way is she standing?"

"Can't say, sir. Can't see her move any."

Dodd ordered the boatswain to pipe to breakfast; and taking his deck glass went lightly up to the foretop-gallant-mast-crossrees. Thence, through the light haze of a glorious morning, he espied a long low schooner, lateen-rigged lying close under Point Leat, a small island about nine miles distant on the weather bow; and nearly in the Agra's course then approaching the Straits of Gaspar, 4 latitude S.

"She is hoive to," said Dodd, very gravely.

At eight o'clock, the stranger lay about two miles to windward; and still hoive to.

By this time all eyes were turned upon her; and a half dozen glasses. Everybody, except the captain, delivered an opinion. She was a Greek lying to for water; she was a Malay coming north with canes.

The captain leaned silent and sombre with his arms on the bulwarks, and watched the suspected craft.

Mr. Fullalove joined the group, and levelled a powerful glass, of his own construction. His inspection was long and minute, and, while the glass was at his eye, Sharpe asked him half in a whisper, could he make out anything?

"Wal," said he, "the varmint looks considerably snaky." Then without moving his glass he let drop a word at a time, as if the facts were trickling into his telescope at the lens, and out at the sight. "One-two-four—seven false ports."

The next observation that trickled out of Fullalove's tube was this: "I judge there are too few hands on deck, and too many—white-eyeballs—glittering at the portholes."

"Confound it!" muttered Bayliss, uneasily; "how can you see that?"

Fullalove replied only by quietly handing his glass to Dodd. The captain, thus appealed to, glued his eye to the tube.

"Well, sir; see the false ports, and the white eyebrows?" asked Sharpe, ironically.

"I see this is the best glass I ever looked through," said Dodd doggedly, without interrupting his inspection.

"I think he is a Malay pirate," said Mr. Grey.

Sharpe took him up very quickly, and, indeed, angrily. "Nonsense! And if he is, he won't venture on a craft of this size."

"Says the whale to the swordfish," suggested Fullalove, with a little guttural laugh.

The captain, with the American glass at his eye, turned half around to the man at the wheel: "Starboard!"

"Starboard it is."

"Steer south-easterly."

"Ay, ay, sir." And the ship's course was thus altered two points.

This order lowered Dodd 50 per cent in Mr. Sharpe's estimation. He held his tongue as long as he could; but at last his surprise and dissatisfaction burst out of him: "Won't that bring him out on us?"

"Very likely, sir," replied Dodd.

"Begging your pardon, captain, would it not be wiser to keep our course, and show the blackguard we don't fear him?"

edged away from her and entered the straits between Long Island and Point Leat, leaving the schooner about two miles and a half distant to the N. W.

Ah! The stranger's deck swarms black with men.

His sham ports fell as if by magic, his guns grinned through the gaps like black teeth; his huge foresail rose and filled, and out he came in chase.

The breeze was a kiss from heaven, the sky a vaulted sapphire, the sea a million dimples of liquid lucid, gold.

"Sharpe," said Dodd, in a tone that conveyed no suspicion of the newcomer, "set the royals, and flying jib—Port!"

"Port it is," cried the man at the helm.

"Steer due south!" And, with these words in his mouth Dodd dived to the gun deck.

By this time elastic Sharpe had recovered the first shock; and the order to crowd sail on the ship galled his pride and his manhood; he muttered, indignantly, "The white feather!" This ended his mind, and he obeyed orders briskly as ever. While he and his hands were setting every rag the ship could carry on that tack, the other officers having unluckily no orders to execute, stood gloomy and helpless, with their eyes glued by a sort of somber fascination, on that coming fate.

But now the captain came bustling on deck, eyed the loftier sails, saw they were drawing well, appointed four midshipmen a staff to convey his orders; gave Bayliss charge of the carronades, Grey of the cutlasses, and directed Mr. Tickell to break the bad news gently to Mrs. Beresford, and to take her below to the orlop deck; ordered the purser to serve out beef, biscuit, and grog to all hands, saying, "Men can't work on an empty stomach, and fighting is hard work." Then beckoned the officers to come round him.

"Gentlemen," said he, confidentially, "in crowding sail on this ship, I had no hope of escaping that fellow on this tack, but I was, and I am, most anxious to gain the open sea, where I can square my yards and run for it, if I see a chance. At present I shall carry on till he comes up within range; and then, to keep the company's canvas from being shot to rags, I shall shorten sail; and to save ship and cargo and all our lives, I shall fight while a plank of her swims. Better to be killed in hot blood than walk the plank in cold."

The officers cheered faintly; the captain's dogged resolution stirred up theirs.

"Shorten sail to the tangles and jib, get the colors ready on the hal-yards, and then send the men aft."

Sail was no sooner shortened, and the crew ranged, than the captain came briskly on deck, saluted, jumped on a carronade, and stood erect. He was not the man to show the crew his forebodings.

"Pipe!" "Silence fore and aft."

"My men, the schooner coming up on our weather quarter is a Portuguese pirate. His character is known; he scuttles all the ships he boards, dishonors the women, and murders the crew. We cracked on to get out of the narrows, and now we have shortened sail to fight this blackguard, and teach him not to molest a British ship. I promise, in the company's name, twenty pounds prize money to every man before the mast if he beat him off or outmaneuver him; thirty if he sink him; and forty if we tow him astern into a friendly port. Eight guns are clear below, three on the weather side, five on the lee; for, if he knows his business, he will come up on the lee quarter; if he doesn't that is no fault of yours nor mine. The muskets are all loaded, the cutlasses ground like razors—"

The reply was a fierce "hurrah!" from a hundred throats, so loud, so deep, so full of volume, it made the ship vibrate, and rang in the creeling-on pirate's ears. Fierce, but cunning, he saw mischief in those shortened sails, and that Union Jack, the terror of his tribe, rising to a British cheer; he lowered his mainsail, and crawled up on the weather quarter. Arrived within a cable's length, he double reefed his foresail to reduce his rate of sailing nearly to that of the ship, and the next moment a tongue of flame, and then a gush of smoke, issued from his lee bow, and the ball flew screaming like a seagull over the Agra's mizzen top. He then put his helm up, and fired his other bow-chaser, and sent the shot hissing and skipping on the water past the ship. This prologue made the novices wince. Bayliss wanted to reply with a carronade; but Dodd forbade him sternly, saying: "If we keep him aloof we are done for."

The pirate drew nearer, and fired both guns in succession, bulled the Agra amidships, and sent an 18-pound ball through her foresail. Most of the faces were pale on the quarter-deck; it was very trying to be shot at, and hit, and make no return. The next double discharge sent one short smash through the stern cabin window, and splintered the bulwark with another, wounding a seaman slightly.

"Lie down forward!" shouted Dodd, through his trumpet. "Bayliss, give him a shot."

The carronade was fired with a tremendous report, but no visible effect. The pirate crept nearer, steering in and out like a snake to avoid the carronades, and firing those two heavy guns alternately into the devoted ship. He hulled the Agra now nearly every shot.

The two available carronades replied noisily, and jumped as usual; they sent one 32-pound shot clean through the schooner's deck and side; but that was literally all they did worth speaking of.

"Curse them!" cried Dodd; "load them with grape! They are not to be trusted with ball. And all my 18-pounders dumb! The coward won't come alongside and give them a chance."

At the next discharge the pirate chipped the mizzen mast, and knocked a sailor into dead pieces on the forecastle. Dodd put his helm down ere the smoke cleared, and got three carronades to bear, heavily laden with grape. Several pirates fell, dead or wounded, on the crowded deck, and some holes appeared in the foresail; this one interchange was quite in favor of the ship.

But the lessons made the enemy more cautious; he crept nearer, but steered so adroitly, now right astern, now on the quarter, that the ship could seldom bring more than one carronade to bear, while he raked her fore and aft with grape and ball.

In this alarming situation, Dodd kept as many of the men below as possible; but for all he could do four were killed and seven wounded.

Fullalove's word came too true; it was the swordfish and the whale.

At last, when the ship was cloven with shot, and peppered with grape, the channel opened; in five minutes more he could put her dead before the wind.

No. The pirate, on whose side luck had been from the first, got half a broadside to bear at long musket shot, killed a midshipman by Dodd's side, cut away two of the Agra's mizzen shrouds, wounded the gaff, and cut the jib away; down fell that powerful sail into the water and dragged across the ship's forefoot, stopping her way to the open sea she panted for; the mates groaned, the crew cheered stoutly, as British tars do in any great disaster; the pirates yelled with ferocious triumph, like the devils they looked.

But most human events, even calamities, have two sides. The Agra being brought almost to a standstill, the pirate forged ahead against his will, and the combat took a new and terrible form. The elephant gun popped, and the rifle cracked, in the Agra's mizzen top, and the man at the pirate's helm jumped into the air and fell dead; both theorists claimed him. Then the three carronades peppered him hotly, and he hurled an iron shower back with fatal effect. Then at last the long 18-pounders on the gun deck got a word in. The old Niler was not the man to miss a vessel alongside in a quiet sea; he sent two round shots clean through him, the third splintered his bulwark and swept across his deck.

"His masts! fire at his masts!" roared Dodd to Monk, through his trumpet; he then got the jib clear

and made what sail he could without taking all the hands from the guns.

This kept the vessels nearly alongside a few minutes, and the fight was hot as fire. The pirate now for the first time hoisted his flag. It was black as ink. His crew yelled as it rose; the Britons, instead of quailing, cheered with fierce derision, the pirate's wild crew of yellow Malays, black chinless Papuans, and bronzed Portuguese, served their side guns, 12-pounders, well and with ferocious cries; the white Britons, drunk with battle now, naked to the waist, grimed with powder and spotted like leopards with blood, their own and their mates', replied with loud undaunted cheers, and deadly hail of grape from the quarter-deck; while the master gunner and his mates, loading with a rapidity the mixed races opposed could not rival, hulled the schooner well between wind and water, and then fired chain shots at her masts, as ordered, and began to play the mischief with her shrouds and rigging. Meantime, Fullalove and Kenealy, aided by Vesplan, who loaded, were quietly butchering the pirate crew two a minute, and hoped to settle the question they were fighting for; smooth bore versus rifle, but unluckily neither fired once without killing, so "there was nothing proven."

The pirate, bold as he was, got sick of fair fighting first; he hoisted his mainsail and drew rapidly ahead, with a slight bearing to the windward, and dismounted a carronade and stove in the ship's quarter-boat, by way of a parting kick.

The men hurled a contemptuous cheer after him; they thought they had beaten him off. But Dodd knew better. He was but retreating a little way to make a more deadly attack than ever; he would soon wear and cross the Agra's defenseless bows, to rake her fore and aft at pistolshot distance, or grapple, and board the enfeebled ship 200 strong.

Dodd flew to the helm, and with his own hands put it hard a weather to give the deck guns one more chance, the last, of sinking or disabling the destroyer. As the ship obeyed, and a deck gun belloved below him, he saw a vessel running out from Long Island, and coming swiftly up on his lee quarter.

It was a schooner. Was she coming to his aid?

Horror! A black flag floated from her foremost head.

While Dodd's eyes were staring almost out of his head at this deathblow to hope, Monk fired again, and just then a pale face came close to Dodd's and a solemn voice whispered in his ear: "Our ammunition is nearly done!"

Dodd seized Sharpe's hand convulsively, and pointed to the pirate's consort coming up to finish them, and said, with the calm of a brave man's despair: "Cutlasses! and die hard!"

At that moment the master gunner fired his last gun. It sent a chain shot on board the retreating pirate, took off a Portuguese head and spun it clean into the sea ever so far to windward, and cut the schooner's foremast so nearly through that it trembled and nodded, and presently snapped with a loud crack, and came down like a broken tree, with the yard and sail, the latter overlapping the deck and burying itself, black flag and all, in the sea; and there in one mo-

ment, lay the destroyer, buffeting and wriggling—like a heron on the water with its long wing broken—an utter cripple.

The victorious crew raised a stunning cheer.

"Silence!" roared Dodd, with his trumpet. "All hands make sail!"

He set his courses, bent a new jib, and stood out to windward close-hauled, in hopes to make a good offing, and then put his ship dead before the wind, which was now rising to a stiff breeze. In doing this he crossed the crippled pirate's bows, within 80 yards, and sore was the temptation to rake him; but his ammunition being short, and his danger being imminent from the other pirate, he had the self-command to resist the great temptation.

He hailed the mizzen-top: "Can you two hinder them from firing that gun?"



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The ship no sooner crossed the schooner's bows than a Malay ran forward with a linstock. Pop went the colonel's ready carbine, and the Malay fell over dead, and the linstock flew out of his hand. A tall Portuguese, with a movement of rage snatched it up, and darted to the gun, the Yankee rifle cracked, but a moment too late. Bang! went the pirate's bow-chaser, and crashed into the Agra's side, and passed nearly through her.

"Ye missed him! Ye missed him!" cried the rival theorist, joyfully. He was mistaken; the smoke cleared, and there was the pirate captain leaning wounded against the mainmast with a Yankee bullet in his shoulder, and his crew uttering yells of dismay and vengeance. They jumped, and raged, and brandished their knives, and made horrid gesticulations of revenge; and the white eyeballs of the Malays and Papuans glittered fiendishly; and the wounded captain raised his sound arm and had a signal hoisted to his consort, and she bore up in chase, and jamming her forelatten flat as a board, lay nearer the wind than the Agra could, and sailed three feet to her two besides. On this superiority being made clear, the situation of the merchant vessel, though not so utterly desperate as before Monk fired his lucky shot, became pitiable enough. If she ran before the wind, the fresh pirate would cut her off; if she lay to windward she might postpone the inevitable and fatal collision with a foe as strong as that she had only escaped by a rare piece of luck, but this would give the crippled pirate time to refit and unite to destroy her. Add to this the falling ammunition, and the thinned crew!

Dodd cast his eyes all round the horizon for help.

The sea was blank.

The bright sun was hidden now; drops of rain fell, and the wind was beginning to sing, and the sea to rise a little.

"Gentlemen," said he, "let us kneel down and pray for wisdom, in this sore strait!"

He and his officers knelt on the quarter-deck. When they rose, Dodd stood rapt about a minute; his great thoughtful eye saw no more the enemy, the sea, nor anything external; it was turned inward. His officers looked at him in silence.

"Sharpe," said he, at last, "there must be a way out of them with such a breeze as this is now, if we could but see it!"

"Ay, if," groaned Sharpe.

Dodd mused again.

"About ship!" said he, softly, like an absent man.

"Ay, ay, sir!"

"Steer due north!" said he, still like one whose mind was elsewhere.

While the ship was coming about he gave minute orders to the mates and the gunner, to insure co-operation in the delicate and dangerous maneuvers that were sure to be on hand.

The wind was W. N. W.; he was standing north; one pirate lay on his lee beam stopping a leak between wind and water, and hacking the deck clear of his broken masts and yards. The other fresh, and thirsting for the easy prey, came up to weather on him and hang on his quarter, pirate fashion.

When they were distant about a cable's length, the fresh pirate, to meet the ship's change of tactics, changed his own, luffed up, and gave the ship a broadside, well-aimed, but not destructive, the guns being loaded with ball.

Dodd, instead of replying immediately, put his helm hard up and ran under the pirate's stern, while he was jammed up in the wind, and with his five 18-pounders raked him fore and aft, then paying off, gave him three carronades crammed with grape and canister, the almost simultaneous discharge of eight guns made the ship tremble and enveloped her in thick smoke; loud shrieks and groans were heard from the schooner; the smoke cleared, the pirate's mainsail hung on deck, his jib-boom was cut off like a carrot and the sail struggling; his fore-

small looked lacerated, lanes of dead and wounded lay still or writhing on his deck, and his lee scuppers ran blood into the sea. Dodd squared his yards and bore away.

The ship rushed down the wind, leaving the schooner staggered and all abroad. But not for long; the pirate wore and fired his bow chasers at the now flying Agra, split one of the carronades in two and killed a Laascar, and made a hole in the foresail; this done, he hoisted his mainsail again to a trice, sent his wounded below, flung his dead overboard, to the horror of their foes, and came after the flying ship, yawning and firing his bow chasers. The ship was silent. She had no shot to throw away. Not only did she take these blows like a coward, but all signs of life disappeared on her except two men at the wheel, and the captain on the main gangway.

Dodd had ordered the crew out of the rigging, armed them with cutlasses, and laid them flat on the forecastle. He also compelled Kenealy and Fullalove to come down out of harm's way, no wiser on the smooth-bore question than when they went up.

The great patient ship ran environed by her foe; one destroyer right in her course, another in her wake, following her with yells of vengeance and pounding away at her—but no reply.

Suddenly the yells of the pirates on both sides ceased, and there was a moment of dead silence on the sea.

Yet nothing fresh had happened.

Yes, this had happened; the pirates to windward, and the pirates to leeward, of the Agra, had found out at one and the same moment that the merchant captain they had lashed and bullied and tortured was a patient but tremendous man. It was not only to rake the fresh schooner he had put his ship before the wind, but also by a double, daring, master-stroke to hurl his monster ship bodily on the other. Without a foresail she could never get out of his way. Her crew had stopped the leak and cut away and unshipped the broken foremast, and were stepping a new one, when they saw the huge ship bearing down in full sail. Nothing easier than to slip out of her way could they get the foresail to draw; but the time was short, the deadly intention manifest, the coming destruction swift. After that solemn silence came a storm of cries and curses, as their searchers went to work to fit the yard and raise the sail, while their fighting men seized their matchlocks and trained the guns. They were well commanded by an heroic able villain. Astern the consort thundered, but the Agra's response was a dead silence more awful than broadsides.

For then was seen with what majesty the enduring Anglo-Saxon fights. One of that indomitable race on the gangway, one at the foremast, two at the wheel, coned and steered the great ship down on a hundred matchlocks, and a grinning broadside, just as they would have coned and steered her into a British harbor.

"Starboard!" said Dodd, in a deep calm voice, with a motion of his hand. "Starboard it is."

The pirate wriggled ahead a little. The man forward made a silent signal to Dodd.

"Port!" said Dodd quietly.

"Port it is."

But at this critical moment the pirate stern sent a mischievous shot, and knocked one of the men to atoms at the helm.

Dodd waved his hand without a word, and another man rose from the deck and took his place in silence, and laid his unshaking hand on the wheel stained with the man's warm blood whose place he took.

The high ship was now scarce 60 yards distant, she seemed to know, she reared her lofty figurehead with great awful shoots into the